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## PASTORAL LETTER – NOVEMBER 2020

Dear friend,

Recently, I had an outdoor visit with someone on his deck. When I arrived at this person's property, the host received me with a warm smile, a warm cup of cider, and a warm slice of pumpkin pie. What got my attention, however, was the t-shirt the host was wearing. It had a provocative and catchy message: an emblem of a donkey embroidered on it with a slogan that read, "*Jesus didn't enter Jerusalem riding an elephant.*" The nuanced message of the t-shirt implies that Jesus was a Democrat.

Whether one is a staunch conservative, a curious independent, or a deep-dish progressive, one has to admit that the t-shirt is cleverly designed.

Leading up to the election, the age-old question of whether Jesus was a Democrat or a Republican has been part of the national discourse in some circles.

I have always been curious about this phenomenon. So, I contacted friends of mine who have posted on social media that Jesus represents their party of choice and asked for them to share their biblical rationale to support their claims.

My progressive friends feel that Jesus's empathy for the poor would make him a Democrat and a supporter of safety-net programs. They cited the miraculous multiplication of five fishes and two loaves of bread to feed 5,000 people who were hungry (Mark 6:30-34), and his enduring statement in The Beatitudes, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 5:3), to bolster their point.

My conservative friends, for their part, are convinced that Jesus would have been aligned with the traditional Republican positions of pro-life and pro-military. They understand Jesus's words in two biblical passages to represent the view that the deprivation of life is wrong, and that true loyalty is expressed in sacrificial living, like a soldier. The passages shared with me were John 10:10, when Jesus said, "*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full*", and, John 15:13, "*There is no greater love than this: that a person would lay down his life for the sake of his friends.*"

So, what was he? While I found the arguments and biblical passages wielded by my friends interesting, I am not persuaded. There is always a danger in using the Bible to domesticate Jesus and turn him into a mascot of our political orientation. So, I personally believe that Jesus was neither.

In fact, Jesus made it clear that he was not interested in attaching his moral vision to any political structure or secular ruler of his time, and arguably our present time, when he said in John 18:36, “*My kingdom is not of this world.*”

The word “kingdom” derives from the Greek word *Basilea*, and this word means the intervening rule of God on earth. The best we can do as people of faith is to engage in faithful waiting and in faithful civic duty, understanding that God is going to make things right solely by God’s power when the Messiah returns.

Let us keep in mind that when Jesus performed his temporal ministry in first-century Palestine, there were at least six major social movements with a political and religious focus. They were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, and the Zealots, among others. These groups all had a unique way of addressing the vexing problem of Roman rule. For example, the Zealots believed in guerilla military tactics as a solution, while the Pharisees believed in excessively religious and dogmatic tactics as a solution. Jesus must have felt that what these groups had to offer was insincere, because he criticized them, referring to one of the groups as “snakes” and “brood of vipers” (Matthew 23) for deceiving the public with false hope and not informing them that true and enduring salvation comes from above.

In writing this letter, I came across the words of a scholar in *The Washington Post*. In his guest column, titled “Jesus Isn’t Interested in America’s Two-Party System”, the author makes the point that Jesus was neither a Democrat nor a Republican. “***To follow Jesus will inevitably require us to walk away from long-held political loyalties to reorder our lives around a constellation of values shaped by Jesus’ teaching, his example, his death, his resurrection, and his lordship over all things.***” (Michael Bird)

In light of the author’s words, do we take our cues from Jesus’s message in the Gospels, or do we take our talking points from our political party of choice?

Whether or not our candidate of choice prevailed on November 3, the important thing to remember is that our ultimate faith is in what God promises to do for us. In the meantime, all we can do is vote and serve as an ambassador of our Christian values in the public square through our speech and deeds.

No matter who wins, our faith reminds us that God’s kingdom will make things right through our commitment to justice and God’s Messianic reign. No matter who wins, let us pray for the well-being of the candidates and for the transition of our country into a place of healing and prosperity. No matter who wins, let us commit ourselves to serving and blessing our neighbor, especially those neighbors who don’t share our political ideology.

Blessings!

Pastor Luis

\*The election’s results were not clear at the time of print.\*